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'JUST FOR A SCRAP OF PAPER'

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In the now historic meeting between Sir Edward Goschen, our Ambassador at Berlin, and the Imperial Chancellor, Dr. von Bethman-Hollweg, the latter expressed considerable surprise that Great Britain was about to enter into war with a friendly nation 'just for a scrap of paper'. To do justice to the Chancellor, his surprise seems to have been very real and his agitation no less real. The fact that this surprise was real should be carefully noted by Englishmen. That the idea of the disarmament of the nations, or their partial disarmament, has not been agreeable to Germany is well known; but that she should consider that treaties solemnly entered into are not worth the paper on which they are written was, however, a revelation for which Europe was entirely unprepared.

On August 2, a German *ultimatum* was presented to Belgium. Provided no opposition was made to the passing of German troops through the country, Belgium's independence would be respected. The news which reached England on August 3, that German troops, before the declaration of war, had violated the French frontier at four points and committed acts of war, was somewhat surprising. Their invasion of Luxemburg was in direct contravention of the Treaty of London which was concluded on May 11, 1867, and was signed by Great Britain, France, Russia, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Prussia, and Austria-Hungary. The invasion of Luxemburg was stated not to imply any hostile intentions against the Grand Duchy. That invasion threw a lurid light on the conception of honour and good faith

prevalent in Prussian circles, and therefore it is not surprising that a German *ultimatum* should have been presented to Belgium, though France had agreed to respect Belgian neutrality. As in the case of Luxemburg, but in a manner more binding, the neutrality and independence of Belgium had been solemnly guaranteed by Prussia, as well as by England, Austria, Russia, and France, in 1839. In August 1870 fresh guarantees of the neutrality of Belgium were obtained, from the French and German Governments, by Lord Granville, England being then prepared to resist, by force of arms, any infringement of that neutrality.

The surprise expressed by the Imperial Chancellor in his interview with Sir Edward Goschen was no doubt intensified, owing to the undoubted fact that it had been taken for granted, by the German Government, that the English ministry was fully engaged in Irish and domestic matters.

There were thus some excuses for the Chancellor's surprise. Belgium, in his opinion, would not suffer more than a temporary inconvenience from the passage of German troops through her territory. And further, it was unlikely that Belgium could offer any serious opposition without the support of Great Britain. Such support must have seemed absolutely impossible according to the information possessed by the German Chancellor.

England has for many years been infested by spies, who were to be found in every grade of British society, and who regularly notified their views of the political situation to the German authorities. Foreigners, however, have never yet been able to form correct estimates as to the course which Englishmen would take at a given crisis. Still, the reports of spies, and the speeches of ministers, together with the events of May, June, and July in Ireland, would seem to have fully justified the

Chancellor in his belief, that Ireland was on the verge of a civil war, which nothing could avert.

Moreover, the Chancellor did not in the slightest degree realize that a German invasion of Belgium would be regarded, to use the words of Mr. Gladstone, as 'the perpetration of the direst crime that ever stained the pages of history', and that these words expressed accurately the view held, not only by all English-speaking people, but by all those who have regarded the plighted word of nations as something which could not easily be disregarded.

Had, however, the Chancellor studied the history of Western Europe, or even glanced through its pages, he must have realized that Great Britain has always been keenly interested in the country now known as Belgium, no less than in the fortunes of Holland. Edward III's entry into the Hundred Years' War, in 1338, was due to a variety of causes; but one of the chief was the evident determination of the French king to dominate Flanders; and Edward's policy in resisting that attempt has many points of resemblance with that adopted by the younger Pitt in 1792–3.

History does indeed, in a way, repeat itself. It is exactly a hundred years since Great Britain's efforts to save Europe from subservience to the French Emperor were rewarded by the occupation of Paris, and Napoleon's imprisonment in Elba; while, a century before Napoleon was consigned to his island prison, Great Britain had resisted and overthrown the ambitious schemes of Louis XIV, one of whose aims was French domination over Belgium and Holland. The European revolt against the aggressions of France had opened in 1688, and in 1689 William III entered upon that struggle against the ascendancy of the French nation which was so satisfactorily continued in Queen Anne's reign. Again, just a century before the accession of William III, which was

in itself an event of overwhelming importance to the balance of power in Europe, the English navy, by defeating the great Armada, had not only saved Holland, but had struck a blow at Spanish ascendancy from which it never recovered. Thus, in the fourteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, Great Britain has steadily pursued a policy of incalculable advantage to Europe. Philip II of Spain, Louis XIV, and Napoleon had adopted an aggressive policy which proved intolerable to all their neighbours. With these monarchs the present German Kaiser must now be numbered, as a ruler whose later policy has been a continued menace to the peace of Europe.

All these sovereigns entirely failed to understand the British character, and the real aims and strength of the British nation. In his preparations for the invasion of England, Philip II made it evident that he was absolutely ignorant of the progress of the British fleet, due to the efforts of Hawkins, or of the importance to England of the independence of Holland. Louis XIV, too, confidently expected to establish his supremacy in the Channel, if not indeed to effect the invasion of England; while Napoleon showed all through his marvellous career an extraordinary ignorance of the importance of sea power.

The present German Kaiser has indeed proved superior to Napoleon in his recognition of the value of sea power, and has made prodigious efforts to place Germany on an equality with Great Britain in respect of naval strength. But he, like Napoleon and Louis XIV, has badly blundered in one most important respect; like them, he has entirely misunderstood the meaning of events in England—events which he imagined would either lead to civil war or to the prolonged weakness of the British Empire. Louis XIV was at first convinced that, using James II as his tool, he would be able to hamper

England by means of Irish disaffection. Disappointed in this calculation, he felt certain in 1701 that the dissensions of the English Parliament, and its dislike of William III, would prevent that monarch from embarking on a policy of serious opposition to France.

The situation in England, just before the Spanish Succession War, was indeed not very dissimilar from the state of things which we have lately witnessed in Parliament. On both occasions civil war must have seemed to a foreigner the only possible solution of the political situation. And yet no sooner had Louis threatened the independence of the Netherlands, than all parties forgot their differences, and presented a united front to France. After the Treaty of Amiens, Napoleon similarly convinced himself that the weak Addington ministry would never resent his policy of calmly ignoring the stipulations of that treaty, and of the Treaty of Lunéville lately concluded with Austria. By the latter treaty he had engaged to withdraw all French troops from Holland as soon as the war between France and England was concluded. No one was more astonished than Napoleon when he found that in consequence of his refusal to evacuate Holland, he was involved in a war with Great Britain, a war which only ended with his fall. He had evidently anticipated the non-renewal of hostilities for at least five years, during which interval he could build up a strong French navy, and investigate the possibilities of French expansion in India and Australia.

The danger to England from the occupation of Holland or Belgium by a great European Power had, as we have already remarked, been fully recognized from the days of Edward III, and had been resisted by successive British Governments. It seems not improbable that the present German Kaiser, like Louis XIV and Napoleon, had thought that the wrangles in the British Parliament

betokened national decay. The Kaiser and his advisers were of the opinion that England, entangled in civil war in Ireland, and occupied with party squabbles at home, would stand by while the German Empire crushed France and defeated Russia. Those tasks accomplished, the inevitable attack on England could be made whenever the moment seemed opportune to the war party in Berlin.

The liberties of Europe are now in as great danger as they were in the days of Philip II, Louis XIV, and Napoleon, should England, France, and Russia not carry out their intention of continuing the war until the Kaiser has been compelled to renounce his aggressive policy, until his fleet and army have been rendered powerless, and the Kiel Canal neutralized.

Certainly, to most foreigners the history of English politics during the last few years must have seemed to foreshadow a long period of weakness, both at home and abroad. And now what is the situation? As in 1702 and as in 1803, domestic quarrels in England are postponed, all parties in Parliament are united, and Englishmen, relying on the justice of the cause for which they are contending, have entered in full confidence upon the greatest struggle in modern times. Like Napoleon, the Kaiser had counted on a period of peace with England for a few years, and while engaged on the invasion of France had no expectation of meeting with any opposition from a nation whom the Prussian war party has for many years openly despised. During the next few years, the defeat of the French nation would have brought immense relief to the financial situation in Germany, and would have rendered France incapable of aiding the 'contemptible' British Empire.

All these expectations have now disappeared, and with them the hopes of establishing German supremacy over Belgium and Holland, and of thus carrying out a policy

begun with the seizure of Schleswig and Holstein, the acquisition of Heligoland, the formation of a strong navy, and the construction of the Kiel Canal. The immediate cause of this sudden overthrow of these hopes and plans is to be found in the over-confidence of the Prussians, which was illustrated by the Chancellor's unaffected surprise at hearing that Great Britain would resent the temporary occupation of Belgium. To him the engagements made by Germany in 1839 and 1870 were not worth the paper on which they were written. Such treaties were mere 'scraps of paper', not deserving of the consideration of a great military power such as the Kaiser controlled, and could not be allowed to stand in the way of the diffusion of the *inestimable advantages of German civilization.*

Englishmen ought not to have been surprised at the attack on France by Germany nor at the violation of Belgian neutrality. Writers like Treitschke and Bernhardi have made no secret of their opinions, which for many years have been accepted and acclaimed in Germany. They have openly advocated the creation of a 'new phase of Empire' which implies the world-wide dominion of Germany. Germany's duty, according to Bernhardi, was to overwhelm France before she had time to develop the three-years system; and, France once humiliated, the annexation or complete submission of Holland and Belgium would follow. The Chancellor declared, in a speech reported in *The Times* on August 11, that he fully realized that the disregard of Belgium's neutrality was contrary to international law, but that, in view of the necessity of crushing the French nation in the shortest possible space of time, no other course was open to Germany.

Probably many Englishmen have not appreciated till quite lately the importance of the ties which bind us to Belgium, or the immense importance to England

of the independence of such states as Holland, Switzerland, and Belgium. By this time many Germans appreciate full well the immensity of the blunder—it might with more accuracy be styled a crime—of the invasion of Belgium. That invasion, if not protested against, would have rendered the position of Switzerland, of Holland, and indeed of all the minor states of Europe, most precarious; it would have destroyed all sense of security in Europe; it would have rendered treaties absolutely valueless; it would have laid Great Britain—without allies—open to well-deserved invasion. The future of Europe as a civilized continent hung upon Great Britain's attitude towards the 'scrap of paper'.

It is likely that, in the west and south of Germany, there will be found many who understand and appreciate the position, the only one possible, taken up by Great Britain; but, if so, their views are not those of the dominant Prussian war party. It is difficult for many Englishmen to realize that, though Germany is practically composed of a number of, one might almost say, nations, some of whom are far beyond others in civilization, it is ruled by a small clique. The Prussians control the governmental machine in Germany; and, as recent events have shown, they are still in somewhat the same stage of civilization as they were when Great Britain helped to rescue them from the domination of Napoleon. Their conduct on the march to Paris in 1814 was very similar to that which marked their attack on Belgium in last August, and which justifies their new and generally accepted designation of 'Huns'.

These Prussians have no respect for treaties, they have an openly expressed contempt for all other nations. The severity, if not brutality, of their military methods, renders it necessary for the more civilized nations to take stern measures, so that Europe shall never again be exposed to the attacks of such savages.

The German Chancellor has lived in a period when there is no longer any hope of the maintenance of a concert of Europe, which must depend for success on the willingness of all the Great Powers to accept its decisions. Bismarck, however, 'in the interests of German unity, made the concert unworkable and left Europe faced once more with the era of unrestricted, international struggle.' That era has been marked by violations of the Act of the Congress of Berlin, and of the Act of Algeciras. It has seen the Agadir incident, and last month the German invasion of Belgium. It is time that a fresh attempt should be made to enforce respect for international treaties, and to defeat the German principle that might, not right, is the foundation of European policy.

This war, upon which Great Britain has entered, will have many results, some of which can be anticipated with confidence. It may, perhaps, lead continental nations to understand the character and aims of the British nation. Even as late as September 7, a German newspaper, the *Vossische Zeitung*, buoyed up its readers with the possibility of an early change in the British Government, and it questioned whether a new 'Cabinet of the stamp of John Morley would bind itself to the pledges of Grey and Asquith, or whether a successor of Poincaré would bind himself to the promises of the Bordeaux refugee'. Such nonsense, however, is taken seriously by many Germans. This only shows their extraordinary ignorance of the situation, and of the grim determination of all members of the British Empire to have done with the 'mailed fist' once and for all. 'Just for a scrap of paper!'—The German Chancellor apparently thought that the violation of the Belgian frontier was justifiable simply because—'rapidity of action was the great German asset'. *Necessitas non habet leges* was his opinion, and therefore treaties into

which Germany had entered were mere waste paper. It was, he declared, 'a matter of life and death to Germany to advance through Belgium and violate the latter's neutrality'. The Chancellor evidently hoped that 'the fear of consequences' would deter Great Britain from taking action. On this point he was rapidly undeceived by Sir Edward Goschen, who explained that 'fear of consequences could hardly be regarded as an excuse for breaking solemn engagements'.

In spite of the 'Scrap of Paper' the Germans attacked Belgium. That in itself renders it impossible to expect loyalty to any treaty from Germany in the future. Moreover, by letting loose swarms of Huns upon defenceless towns like Louvain and Tirlemont and Dinant, and allowing them to destroy priceless art and architectural treasures, and generally to pillage and burn, Germany has shown Europe that her triumph and that of her 'Huns' would throw civilization centuries back, and would eliminate the word 'Honour' from all dictionaries. The colossal mistake made by the war party in Berlin, in deciding to ignore the neutrality of Belgium, now stands revealed.

By the invasion of that country the German armies did indeed gain a considerable military advantage, and were able during August and the early days of September to advance steadily on Paris. But in doing so they encountered from the Belgian, English, and French armies an unexpected resistance, while, at the same time, the shocking cruelties of their troops excited the indignation of the whole civilized world. The contempt of the magniloquent German Government for a 'scrap of paper' will bring untold, but well-deserved, misery on the German nation; it will disabuse the world of any doubt as to the strong ties which bind the British Empire together; it will ensure to Europe a long period of peace.

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